

# UNIVERSITY EXTENSION LECTURES ON SUBJECTS IN HISTORY, LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

## I

### THE RÔLE OF THE PARTIES

**I**F, at the time of the adoption of the Constitution, responsible leaders had been asked whether other states should be added to the American Union, many would undoubtedly have replied in favor of a liberal policy. Again, if the question had been as to the future of democracy, a few, notably from Pennsylvania, would have answered that they looked forward to a time when the suffrage should be extended without regard to the time honored limitations of property and church membership. But if the most liberal and farsighted statesman had been asked whether the whole American government should one day, and that not far away, be organized around a party system, the answer would unquestionably have been, "Not with my consent!"

The reasons given for this position varied with the background of each thinker. Madison feared parties because they would divide the rich from the poor; Jefferson disliked them because they limited the freedom of the individual—"If I could not go to heaven but with a party," he wrote in 1789, "I would not go there at all."); Washington found them wasteful, insincere, and dangerous to the safety of the state. Such ideas were embodied in the electoral system

which seemed to make parties unnecessary by giving careful provision for the nomination of the President by electoral colleges and for his election in ordinary times by the House of Representatives. Even in 1816, Andrew Jackson referred to parties as "monsters to be exterminated." Many years later a very old-fashioned and very distinguished gentleman, perhaps next to Franklin the greatest of our diplomats, himself the son and the grandson of a President, interested to his dying day in public affairs and in public policy, Charles Francis Adams, declared in 1880: "We do not want more organization, more discipline, more machine. We want more men of thought and character, who are able to stand up before us in the full dignity of their personality; and we don't want so many organs. Therefore when men come to me, as they continually do, particularly young men, and are discontented and mutinous, and suggest the possibility of getting up a third party, I have but one reply—'I don't want a third party. There will always, in this country at any rate, be enough who will act with parties, but under present conditions I want to stand on my own legs.'"<sup>1</sup>

By 1880, however, such statements, once so universal, almost disappear. The voice of Adams was one from the past, and the disappointments of his own career after his return from England were, perhaps, in themselves a proof that there was something faulty in his philosophy. Thus, the Liberal Republican movement of 1872, which for a time seemed to many men to carry with it the hope of a better day for American politics, had failed, and largely because Adams, its most natural leader, had refused to see that the progress of Democracy inevitably requires some kind of organization, call it a party or a faction if you

<sup>1</sup>Adams, *Individuality in Politics* (N. Y. 1880).

will, or else be doomed to purely academic inefficiency. After 1890, the writings of such men as Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, Elihu Root, and many others who were themselves to be engaged in party battles, began to paint the advantages of parties in a Republic and to call on young men to enter politics almost as eagerly as the elder statesmen, Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, Washington, Monroe, Jackson, Henry Clay, and Calhoun, had warned against the evils of a system in the making of which each one had borne a not inconspicuous part.

The conflict between the early non-partisan ideals of which we have spoken and the realities of the times was soon apparent. To the end of their days, the Federalists never quite acknowledged that they were a party. As long as they were in power, they preferred to think of themselves rather as "the friends of the administration"; and when those good days were over, as the "friends of good government." In 1808 and again in 1812, a few of their leaders held secret meetings which were later to be described as "conventions," but which certainly were very different from the party conventions after 1832. On one of those occasions, Theodore Sedgwick wrote to Otis, "I cannot endure the humiliating idea that those who alone from education, fortune, character and principle are entitled to command should voluntarily arrange themselves under the banners of a party in all respects inferior, and in many, odious to them."<sup>1</sup> Such a group was obviously at a grave disadvantage with the whole-hearted partisanship of the Republicans, one of whose parsons was preaching at almost the same moment a sermon from the text: "But if ye will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come to pass that those that ye let remain of them shall be pricks in your eyes

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by S. E. Morison, *Am. Hist. Rev.*, Vol. 17, p. 757.

and thorns in your sides, and shall vex you in the land wherein ye dwell." As non-partisan governors, such as James Sullivan, and the one non-partisan President, John Quincy Adams, soon found to their sorrow, the clergyman was, in his politics if not in his exegesis, undoubtedly correct.

We have already noticed the farewell address of Washington, in which in 1796, he had warned his fellow countrymen in most solemn terms against the dangers of a party system. But even he had been compelled to recognize the unwelcome problems of a realistic situation. Thus, on September 27, 1795, one year before the Farewell Address, in a private letter, he had written: "I shall not, while I have the honor of administering the government, bring men into any office of consequence knowingly whose political tenets are adverse to the measures the general government is pursuing; for this, in my opinion, would be a sort of political suicide."<sup>1</sup> And though the secret was well kept, at least from the general public, for more than a generation, Washington must have known that at the very time when he was preparing his most famous State paper, each of the two parties had held secret caucuses attended by the leaders of each group in Congress; that each had nominated the first regular party tickets for the Presidency and Vice-Presidency; that the leader in one caucus was the brilliant young man who was helping Washington with the phrasing of his farewell address; and that in the other, made up of the friends of Jefferson, the leader was probably no other than the same James Madison, who in the famous tenth number of the *Federalist*, only a few years before, had also expressed his own final objections to the creation of parties. Indeed, there are many indications that the Farewell Address, which warned against parties, may be fairly considered the first

<sup>1</sup> Washington, *Writings* (Ford ed.), Vol. 12, p. 107.

campaign document in American history, the most important single forerunner of those curious pronouncements with which we are all so familiar and which we call party platforms. It was certainly so considered at the time by Fisher Ames, one of the most eloquent and best informed of the leaders of the group which their enemies at the time already called a party, but who preferred to regard themselves as merely "the friends of the administration." You will remember that the Farewell Address was published on September 17th of the first Presidential year, 1796. Nine days later, Ames wrote to his friend Oliver Wolcott: "The address of the President is just published here and will be read with admiration. It will serve as a signal, like the dropping of a hat, for the party racers to start, and I expect a great deal of noise, whipping, and spurring; money, it is very probable will be spent, some virtue and more tranquillity lost; but I hope public order will be saved."<sup>1</sup>

The dichotomy between the sincere non-partisan ideals of early American statesmen and the necessities of politics are best illustrated by the case of Jefferson. At the beginning of his administration he thought of parties as a necessary and purely temporary evil. Thus he wrote to one of his supporters: "If we can hit on the true line of conduct which may conciliate the honest part of those who are called federalists and do justice to those who have so long been excluded from the patronage, I shall hope to be able to obliterate, or rather to unite the names of federalists and republicans." But the difficulties proved to be insuperable, and Jefferson remained a party leader. "If a due participation of office is a matter of right," wrote the puzzled Jefferson, "how are vacancies to be obtained? Those by death are few; by resignation none. Can any other mode

<sup>1</sup>George Gibbs, *Memoirs*, Vol. 2, p. 384.

than that of removal be proposed? This is a painful office; but it is my duty, and I meet it as such." Jefferson still hoped that the time would come when party considerations might be discarded and the only questions asked concerning a candidate shall be "is he honest? is he capable? is he faithful to the Constitution?"<sup>1</sup> Apparently the good day never came. At least in 1849, long after the death of Jefferson, when Seward was on the way to a typical inauguration, he wrote: "Thus far on my way to Washington, I find myself floating on a strongly increasing tide of people . . . The world seems almost divided into two classes, both of whom are moving in the same direction; those who are going to California in search of gold, and those going to Washington in quest of office. How many adventurers are preparing themselves for disappointment, revenge, and misanthropy!"

By 1832, the non-partisan tradition had, of course, largely disappeared. Only vestiges were still to be found in the reluctance with which the Americans of the middle period accepted Presidential candidates who went on the stump. Thus Lincoln, in the decisive campaign of 1860, made no speeches at all. Even today, especially in the case of a President seeking reelection, the party leader must always be separated from the President. Political pronouncements seldom come directly from the White House. Mr. Wilson showed rare appreciation of the prejudices of American politics when in 1916 he made his few speeches from Shadow-lawn and not from the official residence of the President. On the other hand, his summons for a Democratic Congress in 1918 was undoubtedly a blunder, not because it was necessarily wrong, but because it was clearly contrary to the traditions of the Presidency. Of all the Presidents, Mr. Hoover is the only one who has made an active campaign

<sup>1</sup> Jefferson, *Writings* (Ford ed.), Vol. 4, pp. 402-405; Vol. 8, pp. 11-12.

in his own behalf. From the point of view of sincerity and public education, the change is undoubtedly desirable, but it is by no means certain that it will prove, if followed in the future, entirely profitable politically.

Thus, from the beginning, each contest made parties increasingly inevitable. The Constitution was accepted, at first by eleven states and eventually by thirteen, not on account of its inherent wisdom, but because its friends organized against bitter opposition and, by arguments, by promises, at length by threats, brought reluctant states within the folds of what came later to seem its almost obvious advantages. Similarly, Washington himself did not become President by a merely spontaneous rising of a grateful people, but because astute political organizers, Gouverneur Morris and Alexander Hamilton in the van, wrote the necessary letters and made sure, first, that Washington would accept if offered the Presidency and, then, that when his name was proposed it should have the unanimous support of the electoral colleges.

Ask me to choose the precise date when national political parties had their origin in America, and I shall be greatly puzzled. A plausible argument can be made, one which depends for its validity on the initial definition of a party, for 1787, the year of the great convention; for 1788, the year when George Washington was elected President; for 1793, when the differences between Jefferson and Hamilton led to an inevitable break; to 1796, when in secrecy so profound that the first traces are now to be found only in letters written long after the event the first regular party nominations were made by the two first caucuses; to 1800, when two well recognized parties fought a great election under party banners; or to 1832, when the present three-party system was at length crystallized, just one hundred years ago today,

by the first regular conventions; but select whichever of these dates you please, and something can be said for each, it is at once apparent in view of everything that happened afterwards that when those first discreet letters were written by thoughtful and patriotic gentlemen in favor of the candidacy of George Washington, of Virginia, for the office of President of the United States a long step had been taken by men who did not believe in parties to the creation of those great social and political organizations with which today we are all so familiar.

As befitted communities which were still essentially aristocratic, the political machinery of the various colonies had been extremely simple. More by custom than by law, an individual placed himself in nomination or was suggested by a few influential men, as prominent men continued to be selected in the old South until the period of the Civil War; and then, if the name carried weight, the election, as in the case of Washington, was almost a foregone conclusion.

The problem of nomination in the national field was obviously more difficult. In a period when a trip even from Boston to Philadelphia was attended by real dangers, and later when Louisiana and Missouri were weeks away from Washington, a community which sent representatives to the capital had performed an almost heroic function and could not be expected to supply delegates for the more ephemeral purposes of party nominations. Even if the desire had been present, how could those distant journeys be financed? The answer to this problem was the nomination by the Congressional caucus, which began secretly in 1796 and which made all the effective nominations until 1824, a period of more than a quarter of a century. Indeed, after the first two exciting party elections of 1796 and 1800, the Federalists declined so rapidly in power, that the decision of the caucus



was in effect the election of the President. In 1816, for example, the nomination of Monroe in the caucus was closely contested, but his election after his nomination was open to no doubt. The constitution had attempted to make a clear separation between the legislature and the executive by denying to Congressmen the right to serve as electors. This provision was now completely nullified, and for a quarter of a century the President was as effectively chosen by the legislature as he is in France today. In these nominations, the House, being the larger body, commanded a greater influence than the Senate.

If two strong parties had continued to be fairly equally represented in Congress, it is at least possible that the caucus, which as a piece of machinery was undoubtedly both cheap and effective, might have endured to this day. If so, the American government must have become by subtle changes Parliamentary as in France rather than executive or Presidential. But the numerical preponderance of the old Republican party tended as always to weaken its discipline. Ambitious candidates who did not have control of the caucus presented their names in other ways. At one time in 1823, there were sixteen candidates, all of whom bore the same party allegiance. One party had proved to be equivalent to no party at all. Accordingly, the electors regained for one brief moment their lost function of making nominations, and for the last time, in 1825, the election fell to the House. Four years later, the personal popularity of Jackson secured his election without any single nominating device. But those days were soon over.

With the introduction of turnpikes, canals, and steamers on the rivers, Americans had developed the habit of meeting in conventions for all sorts of purposes—religious, social, and commercial. They could now use this already familiar

folkway for the purposes of national politics. The Anti-Masons, the first of the third parties, which had almost no representatives in Congress held the first convention in 1831; they were soon followed by the National Republicans who had but few; and in self-defense, the Democrats held a convention as well, even though their own chief candidate was already well known, and little remained to be done save to select a choice for the second place. With the meeting of these conventions, all of which took place in the same convention city of Baltimore, the party system in its present form was thus inaugurated one hundred years ago. The parties had become great societies, creating a new social groove for lonely immigrants and for isolated individuals in the land of the forest and the great rivers. They continued to live, at least in part, because they added color to the monotony of life. Indeed, it is now apparent that these unplanned organizations, more than almost any other of our institutions, were copied from no European or even colonial precedents, but that in their virtues as in their faults they are bone of our bone, indigenous to the American soil.

After the adoption of the convention system, the ways of the parties crystallized with astonishing rapidity into a ritual. The essential conservatism of the party system and the lasting qualities of forms may be illustrated by the fact that if you read the early speeches and those that come later, the only significant change in tone seems to be the tendency of later speakers to call upon dead heroes, Jefferson, Hamilton, Jackson, and Lincoln, whose views are sometimes slightly understood, to make their points. The early parties had living heroes, Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, and sought to go no further back. Washington lived too short a time after his departure from office to become a tutelary divinity. But Jefferson became the sage of Monticello. As

late as 1844, seven years after the close of his Presidency, Jackson still had the right of excommunication. Unwilling to risk the fate of Texas, Robert J. Walker wrote to Jackson begging him to receive Tyler, then President, into the party, "all former differences to be forgotten." Jackson replied with an emphatic, No!, which seems to have brought the incident to a close.<sup>1</sup> Imagine Mr. Hoover or any other recent President maintaining similar prerogatives today! One weakness of the Whigs, in their early years, was the difficulty of finding a living hero who could capture the imagination as Jackson had done. At a later time, the necessities of the modern Republicans led first to the rediscovery of Jefferson, who had been partially forgotten, but whom Lincoln quoted constantly in his speeches; and when his name and sentiments came to be adopted by Bryan, Republican leaders, especially Roosevelt and Lodge, turned to Hamilton, whose name had for many years been partially obscured, but who more than any other typified the philosophy of the party in our own times.

In other respects, despite all the changes which have come in almost every other field of life, the story of one of our conventions last summer would fit almost precisely those early conventions of the thirties or the forties. Again we hear as of yore the temporary and the permanent chairmen, each in inevitable turn, claiming for his own party all the glories of the past and blaming on the other all conceivable misfortunes, from crop failures, to the alternate rise and fall of the business cycle; again we listen to the nominating speeches in which the candidate was brought up on a farm (Was it in Iowa, to which his parents had come in covered wagons?) and so rose by his own unaided exertions to affluence and power. One day a chairman will startle the

<sup>1</sup> Fish, *Civil Service and the Patronage*, p. 154.

nation by some such opening sentence as this: "During the past four years, the party to which we all belong, has been divided in counsels; it has made many mistakes from which it has been partly saved by the timely criticisms of its opponents; most of the legislation for which we should like to claim full credit has been in fact bipartisan, in which many of our party have unfortunately voted with a section of our opponents, etc. etc."; or perhaps we may even live to hear over the radio a nominating speech which will announce, "The honest gentleman whom I present to you tonight is by no means a worker of miracles, his abilities are sound but by no means unusual, his achievements are few and modest, etc."; but the America in which such speeches will be effective must needs be a very different place from the political America of the last hundred years. Consider the campaign of 1840, compare 1880, or even 1932, and again and again, let us hope to a decreasing degree, the slogan has been, as today in the satire of a Gershwin, "Wintergreen for President!"

I realize fully that I have reached a late moment in this lecture, and though I have hinted at the origin of the national parties, have tried to suggest rather than to describe a few of their services as great societies within the nation, have even pointed out in brief and obviously unsatisfactory review the chief changes that took place in central organization, from a period of informal consultation among gentlemen, through the twenty years and more when the caucus was king, to the time when just a hundred years ago the party system took its present form, I have yet to give any definition of my chief term.

When I commenced I fondly believed that I should have no great difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory definition, and I had many which are celebrated from which to choose.

But the problem is the same which one always meets when asked to define any human institution which has endured for more than a few brief years. What is feudalism? What is the Christian church? What is religion? What is a party? and at once it is necessary to ask two other brief and troublesome questions, When? and Where? For it is immediately apparent that a definition that will fit one country and one time will later or elsewhere prove to be far from accurate. So here. Consider the most famous of definitions given by a great statesman at a time when modern parties were yet young, indeed when in America no one was willing to concede their necessity or importance. Edmund Burke defined a party as "a body of men united for promoting, by their joint endeavours, the national interest upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed." The elements of this definition seem attractive, complete harmony, the acceptance of a definite philosophy of government, an eye single to the public welfare. But Burke with his clear eyes would have been the first to acknowledge that the definition did not even remotely describe the parties and the factions in the England of his own day. And Burke's definition would be equally far from fitting any actual organization of the kind which has arisen in America from his day to our own.

And it is well that this should be true. For if Burke had been right, every change from one party to another would involve a virtual revolution. Actually, of course, and from the very beginning, the lines between major parties, at least in America, and if we are not misled by names, I am inclined to believe in England too, have separated shades rather than colors. On the other hand, differences between parties are sometimes supposed to be deeply rooted in fundamental tendencies in human nature. Thus, at the time when these distinctions in England were dramatized by the rivalry of such

leaders as Gladstone and Disraeli, Gilbert sang to the music of Sullivan,

I often think it's comical,  
How nature always does contrive  
That every boy and every gal  
That's born into the world alive,  
Is either a little Liberal  
Or else a little Conservative.

But whatever may be true of England, such distinctions give no clue to the nature of American parties. Many an American, take Bryan as a single illustration, is as radical from certain points of view as he is conservative in others. Accordingly, instead of the familiar two-party system in the English sense, the anatomy of the party system in America has been entirely different.

At every period in American national history we have had a dominant party, occupying a leading position because it represented those social and economic interests which were for the moment most important. So at the beginning for a brief period, the Federalists were the party of the merchants and the professional classes, usually conservative, which were allied with them. Then came the Democrats, the party of the planter and the small farmer, which gained strength with every extension of the frontier into the West. In our own times we have the Republicans who came to represent primarily those business interests which were the product of the amazing industrial changes which followed the War between the States. There are many indications that these fundamental economic relationships have been fully recognized at the time. Thus in the case of the Republicans, to select a single illustration, which I give largely because it occurs in some important manuscripts which have not been published, we have a very frank statement by Wharton Barker, the Philadelphia banker, in a letter to James A.

Garfield. Barker had been the first sponsor of the nomination of Garfield, and when success had been achieved, he wrote to his friend: "For months as you know, I have believed that you would receive the nomination of the Republican party for the Presidency, and to that end I have labored. I am thankful to have been in a position to destroy the political machine, as known under Cameron, and to have built up in my own state a party of true Republicans, led by politicians to be sure, but under the direction and guidance of manufacturers, merchants, and bankers."<sup>1</sup> Similar documents, though seldom so frank, might be cited to illustrate the economic foundations of the other leading parties.

Side by side with the leading party in each period, there has usually been a second party, not quite so strong, resting fundamentally on interests which have themselves been dominant or which hope to gain power in the future. The second party, of which we have, of course, had only two clear illustrations, the Whigs before the war, and the Democrats since that time, is ordinarily at a great disadvantage in a campaign, and can hope to win only occasional elections by taking advantage of the mistakes or the misfortunes of its adversaries. Just as the true function of the major party is to win elections and to guide policy, so the historical function of the second party is that of criticism. More than once, and notably in the Congressional elections of 1874, which brought to a close the saturnalia of extravagance and corruption which we now know as the Reconstruction period, the function of criticism on the part of a group which seldom wins in Presidential years has been of the greatest moment to the nation. On the other hand, the history of the Whigs indicates very clearly that unless the policies of the party have changed or the country itself is turning in a new direc-

<sup>1</sup>Barker to Garfield, June 15, 1880, *Barker Mss.*, Library of Congress.

tion, even an overwhelming victory by a second party is likely to prove both brief and disappointing.

Now, no one can read the platforms of American political parties without being impressed by the obvious fact that the similarities are always much more important than the differences. Plank after plank of one party platform can always be transferred bodily to the platform of its leading rival without in any sense modifying the spirit of either. From some contemporary comments, one would sometimes be led to believe that these similarities are quite new. As a matter of fact, they are, of course, quite as old as our party system itself. Even Jefferson on the morrow of one of the most significant of our Presidential elections, was able to exclaim, "We are all Federalists, we are all Republicans!" And though this may seem mere rhetoric, he and his immediate successors were able to administer the affairs of the government in such a way that at the end, as we have seen, most old-fashioned Federalists found themselves safely in the ranks of the Jeffersonian Republicans.

As a result of these similarities, each succeeding Presidential election turns the course of affairs only slightly from its preceding channel, such changes being sometimes quite as marked when a President of one party, as in the case of Roosevelt, follows a predecessor of the same party, as when there is an apparent revolution in party control. Consider the elections which we can all remember, and it is very doubtful whether any except the Presidential election of 1896, and perhaps the Congressional elections of 1918, were really of vital significance in the history of the nation. I do not mean to say, of course, that America has not changed; but merely that the influence of parties and elections on the immense changes of our times can easily be entirely overestimated.



Now, observers such as Bryce and Ostrogorski who believed in fundamental party differences, have been greatly troubled by this situation. Bryce, of course, invented the phrase which has been so frequently quoted by many who have not given him due credit, and, in describing the parties of the eighties, said that they were "empty bottles." I should rather say that each bottle was partly filled by a liquid whose taste and odor were surprisingly the same. And it is on the whole well that this should be so; for if elections marked off by artificial periods of two and four years meant in each case a fundamental clash between opposite philosophies of government, Americans might well exclaim, "A plague on both your houses." Revolutions, of course, occur in human thought and in life itself, and in America just as everywhere else, but the most significant are seldom the subject of campaign speeches and no Constitution can space their intervals neatly to fall on the anniversaries which we call Presidential years. Just as a single illustration, which might be almost indefinitely extended, in the campaign through which we have passed there were some differences between the platforms, but on the burning question of prohibition the similarity between the two platforms was greater than any one could possibly have foreseen four years ago. Again the silences of the platforms, sometimes as significant as their planks, on such questions as the bonus and the debts, tend, if the planks do not, to prove that each party is compelled by practical considerations to react in the same way to a given political problem.

The reasons for this lack of clear contrast at any given date are at once apparent. Since the Civil War, and to a very large extent before, the dominant party has always been able to count with reasonable certainty on something more than one-third of the Congressional districts. In these

the dominant party has been strong, partly for historical reasons, as in Vermont since 1860, and again for practical and historical reasons as in Pennsylvania. So, too, the party which I have denominated the second or the party of criticism, has for similar reasons been normally able to count safely on somewhat less than one-third of the districts. The only difference between the Republicans and the Democrats in this respect has been that the safe region of the Democratic party has been more definitely grouped, giving rise to the Solid South; but, from election returns, it is easy to determine that the safe Republican districts have usually been quite as solid, and the results show that they have on the whole been more numerous.<sup>1</sup> Now between the two, is another group of about one-third of the Congressional districts, in which again for historical or practical reasons or usually both, the two parties are almost equal. In these doubtful districts, an election can obviously be carried by a minority of independent voters. To these voters, each party, while holding the solid core of its traditional strength, must, inevitably, direct its chief efforts. Putting the matter another way, more than one-third of the American people have for many years been safely Republican in sympathies; less than one-third have been safely Democratic; every close election depends on the other third, and naturally and inevitably, since each party is seeking the suffrages of the same people and is speaking to the same constituency, each major party tends to use the same policies and to speak in similar tones.

Now, personally, I am not only quite sure that this has almost always been the case, but that on the whole it is a fortunate thing that these similarities, so often decried, still appear in our party platforms. In any case, no one will deny that the two parties not only choose the same planks, but that

<sup>1</sup>Holcombe, *Political Parties Today*, p. 201.

they even tend to nominate candidates who represent the same general point of view. In 1880, for example, when the Republicans nominated a major general by brevet, the Democrats went them one better and nominated a real major general. Except, perhaps, that one general wore whiskers and the other was smooth shaven, fundamental differences are not apparent. On the other hand, on such subjects as Civil Service Reform, both platforms were not only alike but furnished a genuine issue of the greatest moment. It is accordingly not necessarily true that there must be differences to make platforms either vital or sincere.

The leaders of major parties have, of course, not been blind to the advantages of clear cut issues. Thus, in 1823, a prominent Senator wrote to the most astute political manager in America, Martin Van Buren: "Could we only hit upon a few great principles and unite their support with that of Crawford, we should succeed beyond doubt."<sup>1</sup> Again, in our own time, Mr. Bryan was constantly and frankly in search of what he called "a paramount issue." But new ideas are obviously dangerous. They may alienate as well as win the necessary voters. So, for the most part, the leaders of major parties have been quite willing to leave the new and untried ideas to third parties.

Now, it is quite apparent from what we have already said, that a definition which would cover the functions of a leading party, would be scarcely adequate if applied to the second party, and would, of course, be still farther from the truth if applied to the third party. These organizations, in some respects quite as interesting as the other two, began to appear in that first typical American campaign one hundred years ago. Since that time there have been few contests in which one or more third parties have not been in the field.

<sup>1</sup>E. M. Shepherd, *Van Buren*, p. 92.

On three or four occasions, notably in 1844 and again in 1884, the strength of a third party has been sufficient to allow it to hold the balance of power and thus to determine the result of a close election between two major parties. Curiously enough, in each of the two chief cases which I have cited, the defeat of Clay and the election of Cleveland were the results which the members of the third party would most have disliked. But for the most part, though the primary function of major parties is to concentrate attention on certain common issues and to win an election for certain different though possibly similar candidates, the third party has no reason for existence at all if it does not advocate interests and points of view so different that they are represented slightly if at all in the platforms of the major parties.

Now I have not intended to be at all cynical in describing a major party as essentially and necessarily an organization with an ear closely glued to the soil of public opinion. From these preoccupations, however, the third party is almost entirely freed. It cannot hope to win an election, it merely takes advantage of the unequalled opportunities for propaganda furnished by an election. The fundamental nature and functions of the third parties thus require an entirely separate definition.

The sources of new ideas in American politics are never to be found in the platforms of major parties, but are to be discovered in the meetings of such private organizations as the League to Enforce Peace and many others. Attention is then focused on these principles by third parties. Some of these ideas, such as the Anti-Masonic agitation of the thirties, are obviously too ephemeral to be of great value; others gain in popularity, and if they have a wide appeal are then adopted by one or, usually, both of the major organizations. And they are so adopted, because in the judg-

ment of practical party leaders they have first been accepted by those sections of the public on which success depends.

You will think of many illustrations of the process which I have described. The abolition of slavery was first the theme of private groups, then of a third party which held the balance of power in the forties; the homestead law was the central plank of the free-soil party before it was accepted by either of the leading parties; the prohibitionists in the seventies advocated not only prohibition but also woman suffrage and the restriction of immigration; the populists of 1892, so often ridiculed, gave great prominence in their platforms to public control of party machinery and party expenses, the direct primary, the popular election of Senators, a federal income tax, and the public regulation of railroads and trusts. And, as you will at once observe, these subjects are almost a complete summary of the most important legislative and constitutional changes of recent times. But when the necessary laws were passed or the amendments were adopted, the party which had first advocated them, had disappeared and was almost forgotten. And it is a generalization, which recent history abundantly supports, that, almost without exception, American laws which mark great changes in the history of the nation, all party orators to the contrary notwithstanding, are almost without exception bipartisan, and that these changes, such as the new immigration policy for a single example, however revolutionary, are accepted not by narrow, partisan majorities, as one might suppose, but by the overwhelming and almost unanimous change of judgment which carries all parties and all public men in the resistless power of its currents.

As Americans came to acknowledge, however reluctantly, the true significance of the parties, in a period when almost every voter claimed membership in one of these organiza-

tions, most men were too busy to claim the slightest responsibility for their conduct. The voter marked a straight ticket, left the finances to the tender mercies of the spoils system, was fairly proud that he at least was not a politician, gave neither private support nor public regulation to the tremendously powerful system in which the very destinies of the nation were involved, and was then astonished and indignant when the parties fell into the control of selfish interests, no more selfish than himself, and was surprised when foreign observers, whose friendly intent was beyond question, told him that the parties had become the masters and not the servants of democracy.

The seventies and the eighties of the last century were the high water mark of a discouraging period of corruption which was soon to change and notably for the better. "I wanted," declared Jay Gould, the celebrated speculator, on oath to a legislative committee before which he was summoned as a witness, "I wanted the legislatures of four states, and to obtain control of them I made the legislatures with my own money; I found this plan a cheaper one than bribery." In the same period, Mr. H. O. Havemeyer testified that he habitually contributed to the campaign chests of both parties and that he considered such contributions a useful form of insurance. Those who with short memories sometimes sigh for the good old days of the convention system, should analyze the composition of some of the bodies to which the American people in those days committed their destinies. Thus a convention of Cook County held at Chicago as late as 1896, had 723 delegates. Among them were 17 persons who had been tried for homicide, 7 who had been convicted of this crime and had served their sentence, 36 who had served terms in the penitentiary for burglary, 2 for picking pockets, 7 gambling-house keepers, 2 keepers

of houses of ill fame, 265 saloon keepers, 14 lawyers, 3 doctors, 148 political employees, 15 ex-policemen, 6 farmers, 3 justices of the peace, and the rest "without occupation."<sup>1</sup> Even as late as 1915, a great American statesman, Elihu Root, said half reminiscently in Albany: "What is the government of this State? The government of the Constitution? Oh no; not half the time, nor half way—for I do not know how many years Mr. Conkling was the supreme ruler of this state; the governor did not count; the legislatures did not count; comptrollers and secretaries of state and what not did not count. It was what Mr. Conkling said; and in a great outburst of rage he was pulled down. Then Mr. Platt ruled the State; for nigh upon twenty years he ruled it. And the capitol was not here; it was at 49 Broadway."<sup>2</sup>

In the new movement which had already begun, and which has gone on unchecked until today, the fundamental importance lies not in the detailed changes that were made, for some of these were undoubtedly mistaken, but in the new attitude which for the first time recognized the responsibility of the State for the parties it had permitted and of the individual for the party to which he belonged.

Now to summarize. Parties came originally into American life through the back door of the Constitution. They were for a time almost surreptitious organizations which no one would quite acknowledge; from the adoption of the convention system in 1832 until the Civil Service Reform Act of 1883, they were great private societies, financed indirectly by the tax payers through the Spoils system; in our own day, they have become increasingly, through the adoption of such measures as the Australian ballot and

<sup>1</sup> *Am. Rev. of Rev.*, Sept. 1897.

<sup>2</sup> Root, *Addresses on Government*, p. 20.

the various laws controlling primaries and campaign expenses, great public agencies whose central place in Democratic government has at length in a decision given in 1932 been recognized, though by a divided vote, by the Supreme Court itself. In the meantime, through growth in population and the even greater additions to the numbers of independent voters, the burdens on the party as an imperfect but essential means of political education have been vastly increased. In 1880, Marshall Jewell, chairman of the Republican campaign committee, wrote that if he could only secure one hundred thousand dollars, he could carry every Northern State and some in the South.<sup>1</sup> In 1928, each of the two major parties spent more than six hundred thousand dollars for radio alone. In 1932, in spite of attempts at economy, each party appears to have spent in the neighborhood of two millions.

In these days when parties are fully accepted as essential to the machinery of government, the problem of finance remains one of the chief unsolved problems. If citizens shut their eyes to the significance of parties, they have no one but themselves to blame if the parties, cut off from their customary sources of revenue, turn for financial assistance to interested and sinister groups. At one time we might have defined a good citizen as one who votes, preferably for his party ticket. Today, we must widen our definition. I am inclined to believe that a good citizen still belongs to a party with whose general point of view he is in harmony; in the second place, that he supports that party by actual contributions according to his means; then that he requires the party to which he belongs to select good men for office and wise policies when in office; and finally, especially in

<sup>1</sup>Marshall Jewell to Wharton Barker, Oct. 13, 1880, *Barker Mss.*, Library of Congress.



local and state elections, having contributed to his party, that he takes his party with a grain of salt, and does not hesitate whenever necessary to vote for the candidates of some other party. Senator Ingalls, of Kansas, declared in the eighties that politics is war and the purification of politics an iridescent dream. To an increasing degree, as the number of men and women who have learned to take an active interest in politics indicates, the dreams of the eighties come to take the substance of reality. And the problems of the future are today, as always, in their deepest meaning, problems first of individual education and then, also, of public policy.

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